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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000158

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SUBJECT: DAMASCUS INTENT ON HOLDING ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT

REF: DAMASCUS 156

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin,  
American Embassy Damascus, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary: A little more than three weeks from the appointed date, the SARG appears determined to proceed with an Arab summit, even if only seven Arab head's of state attend. Saudi and Egyptian pressure on other Arab countries to downgrade the level of representation in the absence of the election of a Lebanese president has registered concerns here, but the Syrian regime shows no signs of granting concessions on Lebanon that would facilitate this outcome. Arab League Secretary General Amre Moussa raised the possibility of postponing the summit during his March 1 visit to Damascus, but we understand Bashar flatly rejected that idea. The SARG's ability to play the U.S.S. Cole deployment and Israel's Gaza incursions as "threats to the Arab nation" appear to have strengthened its resolve. In the end, Bashar's desire for photo ops in Damascus with even a few Arab leaders and his emotional claim to lead "Arab resistance" may be driving the SARG's position to carry on with the summit. End Summary

¶2. (C) Embassy sources are indicating almost unanimously that the Syrian regime has gone into crisis management mode in response to a number of recent events, including intense diplomatic pressure from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the U.S. regarding Lebanon; the rise in regional tensions resulting from Imad Mugniyah's assassination and Hizballah threats of reprisal; Israeli military operations in Gaza; and the deployment of the U.S.S. Cole outside the territorial waters of Lebanon. None of these events, including international pressure to resolve Lebanon's presidential crisis, appears to have altered Syria's determination to host the March 29-30 Arab League summit or make any concessions on Lebanon.

¶3. (C) International Crisis Group analyst Peter Harling (protect) described what he perceived as the Syrian regime's "battening down of the hatches" in response to U.S., European, and Arab pressure on Syria to yield ground on Lebanon. Harling surmised that Bashar and regime insiders viewed the Lebanese standoff as a existential struggle that went well beyond the election of a consensus president. Syrian leaders believed the outcome of the March 8-March 14 conflict had become a zero-sum struggle that would affect Syrian interests for a long-time to come. Consequently, Syria would continue to back Hizballah's tactical demand for a blocking 1/3 of the Lebanese cabinet to protect any possibility that the Lebanese government might act to disarm Hizballah's militia. Hizballah's military capability, judged Harling, represented Syria's primary interest in Lebanon, and international attempts to force Syria to wield its influence

with Hizballah to make political progress would fail without some indication of what Syria stood to gain.

14. (C) Samir al-Taqi, Director of the Orient Center and informal MFA advisor, indicated that there was firm resolve now within the Syrian government regarding Lebanon. Senior regime leaders had repeatedly rebuffed FM Mouallem's recommendations to demonstrate a SARG willingness to work for a solution in Lebanon in order to attract more Arab support for the Arab League Summit. Al-Taqi saw little possibility that the SARG would yield to increasing international pressure to elect a consensus Lebanese president in the absence of clear guarantees protecting Hizballah's position. Though the Mugniyah assassination had deeply embarrassed the regime and led to tensions in relations with Iran and Hizballah, at the end of the day, Syria had made up its mind to hold firm on its Lebanon policy. That did not necessarily mean, however, that Syria would automatically rule out concessions on other files, such as Iraq, if there was a possibility that doing so might reduce pressure.

15. (C) Although uncertain about who will attend, the Syrian regime appears intent on going forward hosting the Arab League summit, come what may. An Egyptian Embassy contact relayed that Arab League Secretary General Moussa's March 1 visit had yielded no progress on Lebanon. Moussa reportedly told Bashar that an Arab League Summit in the current context of the Lebanon crisis and ongoing Israeli military operations in Gaza would result in a divided meeting and be a bad outcome for the Arab world. We understand Moussa proposed a postponement of the summit pending resolution of the Lebanon issue, which Bashar flatly rejected.

16. (C) Events in Gaza and the deployment of the U.S.S. Cole have provided the SARG a favorite theme to beat, i.e. the need for Pan-Arab unity in the face of external threats. The Egyptian diplomat noted that "Moussa talked about Lebanon" during his joint press conference with FM Moullem, while Moullem "scored points by ridiculing the U.S. deployment of the U.S.S. Cole at the same time that Israelis were massacring Palestinian civilians in Gaza." Since the start of the recent hostilities in Gaza, Syrian controlled media has been focusing almost exclusively on the plight of the Palestinians and devoted significant live television coverage to a March 4 SARG sanctioned anti-Israeli protest which occurred in downtown Damascus and attracted thousands; the first large protest the SARG has arranged in over two years (reftel).

17. (C) Saudi Ambassador Ahmed Qatani (protect) back from a week's recall to Riyadh, told Charge March 5 that the King had told him "there is nothing left for you to do in Syria," and had reassigned him to Doha "where there is work to be done." Qatani said that he did not believe the SARG would make any concessions on Lebanon although there was a small chance they would try and get "some other Lebanese representative" to take the Lebanon seat at the Summit. Qatani said he doubted the SARG was smart enough to extend a personal invitation to PM Siniora, which in his view might place March 14 in a difficult position. Qatani said the Syrians planned to go ahead "come what may" and although there was "a small chance some breakthrough could be achieved" in advance of the March 11 date for the postponed Lebanese elections, he "very much doubted it." Qatani debunked rumors of a Saudi-Egyptian effort to convene a counter-summit, and blamed the situation in Gaza for making efforts to minimize the Damascus summit more difficult.

18. (C) Media and diplomatic contacts assess that the SARG estimates up to 11 Arab heads of state will attend the summit, "and that will be plenty," according to as-Safir reporter Ziad Haydar. According to Haydar, the SARG was encouraged that Qatar may have blocked Saudi efforts to achieve GCC consensus on boycotting the summit at the March 1 GCC ministerial. Sources here indicate the SARG is fairly certain to gain head of state attendance from Mauritania, Sudan, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Qatar, and Yemen. Although the SARG is attempting to claim Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE, and

Iraq will send heads of state, we believe SARG is sanguine that representation may be lower from these states. SARG understands Jordan will likely send a FM and assumes, as in past years, Morocco and Oman will not be represented at the head of state level.

¶9. (C) Charge spoke in recent days to both the South African Ambassador here and the Brazilian Charge about their countries possible attendance as observers at the Summit. The South African said there was some interest in South Africa in line with a proposed head of state visit to the region and continuing South African efforts to attempt to play some type of mediating role in Lebanon. When Charge pointed out the negative image of South African attendance with Lebanon represented at the summit by an empty chair, the South African took the point but it was unclear what he was recommending to his capital. The Brazilian expressed his capital's irritation that South Africa had received the Syrian invitation to the summit two weeks in advance of Brazil. He noted there was no decision on attendance from Brasilia, but thought there would be low-level attendance (as the FM had visited the region and Syria so recently) if any. Brazil had asked the Syrians for details on the extent of their participation as observers, and had received a minimal reply that suggested participation lower than at the Foreign Minister level "was not worth the trip." He noted that Brazil had chosen to not participate in the Riyadh summit last year. We have no readout on Indian plans at this point.

¶10. (C) Comment: As a well-plugged in journalist here emphasized to us recently, Bashar "cares about his image" and even if it is only seven Arab leaders who make the trek to Damascus, can't resist the thought of TV images of him kissing arriving dignitaries at the foot of the stairs to their aircraft at Damascus airport. And, despite the Saudi efforts, the journalist went on, "how much embarrassment will two days cause?" Unfortunately, events in Gaza have also given a propaganda boost to Bashar's emotional tendency to want to lead "the capital of Arab resistance," as he stated at a recent event celebrating Damascus as the capital of Arab culture, and he may even be preparing another "half-men" speech a la his September 2006 blast with which to bash some of the Arab leaders that boycott his summit and perhaps achieve some resonance with the "Arab street." While there remains a remote possibility of some last-minute (and probably too late) Syrian initiative on Lebanon, we see no inclination in that direction by the SARG here.

CORBIN